‘The elusive meaning of success for student and tutors in a business school’

A Learning and Teaching Project
University of the West of England

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This working paper presents the findings of a student/tutor participative inquiry into the meaning of ‘success’ for students in the university. The paper tells the story of how the inquiry developed, and analyses how learning developed through co-inquiry practices based on working with visual materials.

_The associated conference presentation by student/tutor co inquirers, is also available on ResearchGate_

**Key words:** participative action research; visual inquiry; inquiry / enquiry based learning; student / tutor co inquiry; success; business school.

**Introduction**

This participative inquiry was inspired by the experience of doing visual inquiry with students on ‘Managing Change’, a level three organisation studies undergraduate module in Bristol Business School, UWE (Page and Gaggiotti, 2012). The project title ‘Why should students in a business school visit an art gallery?’ was taken from student debate during a field trip to the Arnolfini art gallery in Bristol. Despite initial skepticism, many students on the module became strong advocates for the pedagogic approach developed on the module. This project evolved from a series of co-presentations of the approach by tutors and students. It was led by tutors and graduates from the module, and funded as a UWE Learning and Teaching Project, 2010-2012. It aimed to develop practices for supporting student led learning in and beyond the classroom, linking forward to learning for life, including but not limited to employability. In particular, we wanted to discover how visual inquiry might enable diversity to become a resource to enable and inform student led inquiry as an approach to teaching and learning.

Learning through inquiry is a widely advocated pedagogical approach, and has been adopted in a variety of disciplinary contexts on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. However, methods developed are varied, and there is currently little systematic knowledge about the practice of inquiry-based learning (IBL) in higher education (Aditomo, Goodyear, Bliuc & Ellis, 2013). Referred to alternately as Inquiry or Enquiry Based learning (IBL or EBL), it offers a philosophical resource and pedagogical methods that aim to encourage student confidence in their own capacity to learn through self directed inquiry (Levy & Petruslis, 2012). The key principle is one of student learning through the art of questioning, so that knowledge is understood to be a creative and interpretive process, rather than a quest for ‘one right answer’. These principles
underpin learning processes that are dialogic and interactive, a process of
discovery through inquiry. IBL approaches vary from ‘discovery’ orientation to
more structured and guided forms (Spronken-Smith & Walker, 2010).

Developing a more ‘student centred’ and ‘research led’ approach is a strategic
aim of UWE’s learning and teaching strategy. However research studies and our
own practical experience had demonstrated that there are practical as well as
professional challenges for staff in adopting this approach (Grisoni, Jarvis and
Page, 2008; Page, Gaggiotti and Jarvis 2009) We had established that co inquiry
with students requires a willingness to improvise in planned teaching sessions,
flexibility in timetabling, and space for break out groups in classrooms, a degree
of comfort with IBL that is not widely shared or compatible with standardized
team teaching necessary for large core modules. Our research and experience
was consistent with studies that identify enablers and constraints relating to
teacher attributes, course design and institutional culture (Walker, Batchelor,
O’Steen & Angelo, 2011).

In this participatory co inquiry graduates and tutors set out to explore scope
across faculties for introducing the IBL principles and visual inquiry processes
developed on our relatively small module in the Business School. The project
grew out of discussion with colleagues and students, and at HEA where students
and tutors had made presentations of their experience of IBL, and in particular
their work with visual materials, in the classroom (LTEA, 2008; HEA Escalate
student conference, 2009). We were interested in how diversity in approaches to
learning might become a resource rather than an impediment to group learning
within the constraints of assessment; what this might require of tutors’ capacity,
and what supports might be needed in the institutional context.

Student and tutor co presentations from our early work and from this
participative inquiry are referenced in the bibliography. This working paper
offers a detailed account of how graduates and tutors experienced the inquiry
process. It focuses on the learning that came from the visual inquiry practices
into the meaning of ‘success’ for students. It should be read with the visual
presentation put together by members of the co inquiry team, referenced at the
end of this paper (Bowen, Page, Lukac, and Willis, 2012).

**The research design and methodology: Three cycles of visual inquiry**

Participative inquiry is an action research approach designed to support change
for purposes shared by research participants (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). This
participative research project aimed to bring students, graduates and tutors
together as co researchers independently of the assessment context to develop
and to test visual inquiry methods for learning across faculty contexts. A Student
inquiry using visual materials had evolved on the ‘Managing Change’, and a
variety of methods developed (Page and Gaggiotti, 2012; 2013). These methods
drew from visual ethnographers who distinguish between the audience and the
creator of images as the site of meaning making (Pink, 2009; Rose, 2009;
Warren, 2002). Student field trips to an art gallery, to Clifton suspension bridge
became a resource for generating visual materials, learning from interpretation of experience. Students and graduates had made presentations about their learning from IBL, and in particular about their learning from inquiry with visual materials, at HEA and UWE faculty conferences (see bibliography).

In response to an open invitation a self selected research team came together made up Rachel Willis and Mariana Lukaj, graduate students from ‘Managing Change’, a Louise Bowen, doctoral student in the Department of Education, tutors in organisation studies and a Dr Lesley Moore, National Learning and Teaching Fellow, project sponsor and mentor. The team designed three cycles of inquiry, each comprising a workshop followed by a review and planning / sense making session. The first workshop took place during welcome week with 25 first year management degree students. In the second workshop a smaller group of business school students and tutors from three levels continued the inquiry. The third and final workshop took place with second year students some of who had participated in the first workshop one year previously. Findings were presented at the SRHE international conference in 2011, and at the UWE annual learning and teaching conference in 2012 (Page, Lukaj and Bowen, 2012).

Inquiry cycle 1

This first cycle of inquiry was planned as part of the Business School Welcome Week programme at the beginning of the academic year 2010. The inquiry theme, ‘the meaning of success for student and tutors in a business school’, was taken up from the overall theme of the student induction. Two half day sessions were planned for 35 students who were studying Management, and therefore likely to be exposed to similar methods in their taught module. Colleagues from the faculty of business and law were invited to take part. Before the workshops, students were invited to form subgroups and to take five photos that captured their ideas of success. Photos were to be taken on campus or in the city, in relation to the themes of personal, social, academic or long term success-employability.

At the workshop each subgroup was invited upload their pictures into an album they created on a project webpage, and to select and to verbally present three of their pictures (Bowen et al, 2012) The audience was then encouraged to respond with reflections on what they ‘saw’ in the photos (Page and Gaggiotti, 2012; Rose, 2009). Research team members facilitated a discussion with the audience in which we explored emergent themes provoked by the images presented in the photos. The photos selected were varied and imaginative: a display of trophies, a notice board displaying exam results, students celebrating; doors slightly open, buildings under construction, a group of students descending a flight of stairs, being at a crossroads; recycling bins, a dictionary open at the definition of success; expensive cars and designer shops at a newly opened mall in the city. Audience discussion developed as different associations were brought to the presentation. Hidden themes were discovered when groups were asked to show the pictures they had not selected for viewing. In one group a photo of a group of volunteers constructing a building had been discarded in
favour of photos of designer shops and material signs of success. A strong debate
developed as graduate researchers challenged the construct of success in terms
of material wealth in favour of the sense of reward for achievement and the hard
work that purchasing power represented. Contrasts emerged between the two
sessions. Visible signs of material success such as designer clothes, cars, money
to buy in expensive shops, or signs of competitive success such as trophies,
badges, contrasted with emphasis on the personal qualities needed for success:
self motivation, resilience, perseverance; networks and relationships that help to
sustain individuals, and processes and skills for being successful: time
management, goal setting, seeing and taking opportunities.

In some of their verbal presentations student used their photos as metaphors to
introduce themes that a reading of the pictures might not suggest. A group of
students walking down a flight of stairs for example was introduced as ‘learning
from mistakes’; a display of sports cups and trophies to indicate ‘team work’; a
half open door to indicate ‘making use of doors slightly open’. Alongside team
work there was a strong emphasis on the individual ‘taking responsibility for
ones own success’, and ‘being the best, celebrating’.

In contrast in their presentations graduate researchers stated that ‘what success
means for me has changed’. Their themes were self motivation; persistence and
continuity in an ongoing desire to learn; personal success celebrated at a
graduation ball and ceremony where the graduates in their robes stand beside a
signpost, signaling ‘being at a crossroads’ after graduation. In both cases city
landmarks of ‘success’ – the London Eye, the Bristol cathedral- served as a
metaphor for individual success (see the visual presentation).

Methods adopted for doing the visual inquiry work were varied. In some cases
participants sought images and took pictures to illustrate preplanned content.
Others adopted an emergent approach, flicking through magazines or walking
around on campus to take pictures, then making a selection from the images
collected to put together a presentation. There was scope for more discussion
about what could be learned from the aesthetics of the photos. For example in
one case a student commented on the well composed, brochure like quality of a
picture of students in a study bedroom. Another student noted that there were
aspects of the picture that had not been planned or referred to in the
presentation: a mirror with dark shadowy shapes reflected, an open door behind
the student at her computer in the foreground.

Reflections and Findings

After workshop one, the research team met to review findings and to identify
research questions to take forward into the second cycle of research and to plan
workshop 2:

- Working with visual materials gave students an anchor, something to
  hold onto that can ‘speak for itself’. Photos made thoughts more tangible.
- Images gave some students a voice when their views did not appear in the
  verbal presentation.
• Using visual images allowed for spontaneity, improvisation in presenting ideas.
• Images acted as triggers, prompts for elaboration of ideas grounded in emotion beyond abstract concepts.
• Leadership / group dynamics determined which photos were selected for presentation; some of those that were not initially selected provoked more discussion when presented.
• The meaning making process needed strong facilitation, and this was effectively done by graduate student members of the research group, who were familiar with visual inquiry and who were able to engage with inquiry as a learning process.

Researchers identified an underlying unstated theme of instability, transience v a search for permanence, security. The meaning of success was it was felt contingent and its focus changed at different points in a trajectory, from enrollment to graduation and beyond. To explore this further we decided to broaden the scope of the inquiry, and to focus on the changing meaning and interpretations of images of success over time. To achieve this we would invite students and tutors in different year groups to join us in a second workshop.

**Inquiry cycle 2**

In contrast to workshop 1, workshop 2 was not part of a scheduled learning activity and this was reflected in lower attendance. Although accredited with a certificate of attendance and widely advertised through module leaders only one tutor and a few students from each of three year groups in organisation studies attended. Student and tutor feedback suggested this reflected institutional pressures to priorities activities related to assessment and timetabling.

The workshop opened with an introduction to the research theme of ‘an inquiry into the meaning of success’. Parallel workshops were led by colleagues from the Faculty of Education (autoethnographic writing, Dr Catherine Rosenberg) and Organisation Studies (visual field trip, Dr Harriet Shortt). Two members of the research team acted as process observers while others participated in workshops.

To begin participants were invited to identify what questions they brought to the theme of ‘the meaning of success’. In group discussion the following inquiry questions emerged:

• Is success an external or an internal construct?
• What is the tension between the two?
• Who constructs success?
• Is success measurable?
• How is success viewed at different life stages?
• Exploration of manipulation of the meaning of success
• Exploration of inquiry into personal or social meaning of success
The 'visual field trip' and 'auto ethnographic writing' were introduced as methodologies for exploring these questions, and participants invited to join one or the other session. A research group member joined each group as participant observer.

For the visual field trip participants collaboratively planned a trip on campus to explore through photography, their inquiry questions about ‘success’. As they walked, the ‘plan’ succumbed to improvisation and spontaneity, and dialogue developed as photographs were taken. On return, more than 50 pictures were printed out and clustered in relation to the original questions held. New themes emerged and a process of exploration through conversation and dialogue developed. Participants discovered multiple possibilities for interpretation of images, inspired by memories and experiences that were evoked and shared. Deeper inquiry questions about the meaning and construct of success developed. The focus shifted from a process of sharing different meanings to questioning how the notion of success is constructed, and by whom. Post it notes were used to record questions and themes as they emerged (see visual presentation).

Some of these were:

- Evolving and elusive meanings of success
- Conflicts and tensions - organisational vs individual idea of success
- Entering and leaving the organisation
- Continual change/choice
- Journey process
- Everything and nothing
- Inner and outer contexts - constructs of success
- ‘Daily everyday’ meanings vs point of destination for success

The auto ethnographic writings were shared and themes identified. Members then joined the visual inquiry group and identified common themes.

**Reflections and Findings**

The research team members met to review the research process and findings. Many reflections focused on contrasts between the quality of this workshop with workshop 1, both in terms of research activities and quality of participation. While the number of participants was small, engagement was deep and findings related both to visual inquiry methodology and amplifying the meanings brought to the theme of success. Within the team, it was as if a collective process was underway of developing a shared understanding of the tensions and interplay between internal and external constructs of success.

Workshop participants and research group members completed feedback sheets after the event. In response to a question asking whether they had been surprised at the workshop they surprised us!

Yes, through listening in on the reflections on the writing workshop, the themes of internationalization and externalization of success and how
writing or visual enquiry can help to find greater internal balance in our ownership of success.

DS – tutor

One thing that did surprise me was the ability of the first year students to really grasp the concept of inquiry based learning, and demonstrate a real understanding of methods that they probably would not have encountered previously. I was really impressed by their level of engagement and the depth of the questions that they brought to the discussions.

RW - co researcher

In a further question, we asked ‘Do you think that visual and / or auto ethnographic writing inquiry is a useful way to encourage and support student learning from a variety of different experiences and views?’

I strongly agree that visual and writing enquiry ought to be a key part of any balanced curriculum. It enables a different and quite powerful experience of social constructionist arguments on reality and meaning of concepts.

DS-tutor

Absolutely. Using visual methods again in the form of photography gave us a medium that allowed us to dig deeper, as opposed to just scratching the surface, when exploring our ideas about success. I believe auto ethnographic writing also helped us to explore and challenge our ideas in a deep and meaningful way.

ML graduate co researcher

This workshop also reinforced the value for me of diversity when working and researching in this way. Having a diverse group of people from various different backgrounds added depth to the insights that we had about success.

RW graduate co researcher

Reflecting on how they can be successful in an organisation, whether as a university student or an employee, can enhance self-leadership skills, especially resilience and emotional intelligence.

LM post graduate co-researcher

There was a sense of excitement and playful interaction among team members that reflected our development as a team and this was manifest in comments made by team members, and in the pictures taken of our activities (see Bowen et al, 2012):

I have a memory of participants interacting with each other in a collaborative and spontaneous way – we moved around and between meeting rooms and the campus throughout the day so our cycles of
individual reflection, group research, idea sharing and decision making were marked by physical movement and changes in location.

*LB postgraduate co researcher*

We talked about the external pressures and ideas of success, and how we often try to conform to these ideologies.

*RW graduate researcher*

We started to think about success in the everyday sense. Getting through each day, tackling problems that you face, making the best of what you have got.

*ML graduate researcher*

It was really interesting to discover how conditioned our learning is. Why, to begin with, we may struggle using these methods of inquiry. How, from an early age, we are not necessarily taught to think for ourselves and question things that we encounter. Instead we often just accept things as the way they are.

*RW graduate co researcher*

Feedback from participants and co researchers illustrate the value of these methods for encouraging development of understanding of success as a social construct. The quality of feedback from core research team members evidences learning through participative inquiry, over a period of time.

In a third and final cycle of inquiry we returned to students who had taken part in workshop 1, now in their second year, to review how their thinking about ‘success’ had developed and how they might now engage with visual inquiry.

**Inquiry Cycle 3**

This time graduate researchers took the lead in designing and facilitating the workshop. This took place within a scheduled tutorial for second year students where the theme was career change. Attendance was high (25 out of a possible 40). Researchers introduced the inquiry theme and invited students to work in sub groups to create a poster to illustrate the meaning of ‘career success’, using photos reproduced from workshop one, and a images selected from magazines. Students were then asked to present their posters with a verbal commentary.

Students quickly became absorbed in selecting images and making the collages. Several exclaimed at seeing photos they recognized as their own within the material presented. Each collage used a selection of old and new images and text cut and pasted from a selection of magazines provided. Five posters were presented, and while the themes were similar there were differences in emphasis and complexity of content and verbal presentations (see illustrations in Bowen et al, 2012). Verbal presentations were each very different in approach. Some posters were complex in composition and juxtaposition of images and text, suggesting depth of discussion about ‘success’ as a construct. Others appeared to
be organised around a single construct (‘girls, money, knights’). Researchers recorded key words and phrases used by presenters. The following specific themes emerged:

- Images and text referring to material goods ‘nice bling, brands, money, nice clothes, nice cars, status; chocolate, jewellery, nice shoes’, were predominant in all the posters. They were associated with achievement, and seen as rewards, but clearly distinguished from ‘happiness’.
- There were images referring to ‘striving’ against the odds and defying scepticism from others in order to succeed (Paralympics blade runner; Dragons Den winner Peter Jones), and exhortations to individuals to self invent, find happiness and create your own future.
- A photograph from workshop 1 of ‘building’ was taken up as a metaphor linking business and personal success, a change of reading from Workshop 1 where this image had first been discarded, then introduced as a reference to participation in a voluntary project.
- One group referred to the role of corporations in shaping consumer demand and desire.
- Mobility, travel and choice figured as strong positive values and were named in posters and presentations.
- There was more reference to complexity and contrasting themes in presentations from mixed gender groups where both men and women took lead roles.
- A group with a single spokesperson presented in a way that suggested an uncritically macho approach, and buy-in to consumerism. A closer look at the poster signalled that this might have been ironic, and did not represent a consensus. This group had only one female member who remained silent, along with others who did not participate in the verbal presentation.
- Gendered difference in concepts and values of success were named by one group as a dimension in their verbal presentation.
- In contrast to the first workshop there was more explicit emphasis on individual achievement; the themes of personal happiness and material success were linked but not synonymous.

Reflections and Findings

The collages evoked more complexity and ambivalence than was apparent from the verbal presentations. The ‘money girls, and knighthoods’ poster had a post it with three key points: ‘houses, money may be an indicator of power’ and ‘awards for your work may mean you are appreciated’. One poster used the ‘success I found elusive’ picture from the WW workshop. There was sophistication in use of images to represent contrasting notions of internally and externally constructed notions of ‘success’, ‘reward’, ‘being appreciated’, ‘personal freedom’. Business success and individual success are shown to be separate and linked. Individual choice. ‘Where do you want to go?’ ‘What would you do?’ ‘Discover more!’ are posed as questions on one poster, and ‘make a life, not a living’. 
There was scope for a lot more probing and critical appreciation of the tensions between these different notions of success. This would have required stronger facilitation, to override competitive and gendered dynamics within the groups who had presented. The discussion and presentations focussed on individual images, but there were tensions between constructs and complexity emerged in the juxtapositions between images and overall composition that were not discussed (Page and Gaggiotti, 2012). With more time to work with individual groups we might have asked ‘what pictures did you not use?’ ‘how did you arrive at your chosen theme/collage design? Were there ideas in the group that did not get represented? What new ideas came from the process of looking at images? When you look now at your collage, what do you see (draw attention to juxtapositions between images, overall patterns and contrasts, use of colour etc.)? The experience of workshop 2 demonstrated that with more time, this would have been possible, and a fruitful line of inquiry to take.

Specific points to attend to in the practice of visual inquiry could now be summarized:

• Attention to group process: consensus making process-inclusion/exclusion/ participation/leadership and how these shaped ‘sense giving’.
• Selection of images: on what basis selection made? What was discarded? Were images used to represent ideas/ as metaphors/ as signs or containers of emergent meaning?
• Content: focus attention on reading beyond individual images, towards juxtapositions/ links/ contrasts between individual images within collages.
• Aesthetics: composition, use of colour, framing, what is in the picture but not made explicit by presenters.
• Presenting: what reading of the visual is given by the verbal commentary? To what is the audience attention drawn/ not?
• Audencing: what is provoked or evoked in the audience? What additional readings are offered? Emerge?
• Time: Visual Inquiry is a continuous process that requires time, endorses thinking and the space to do it.

**Project Learning and Research outcomes**

The learning journey for the graduate student/tutor research team was considerable. During three iterative inquiry cycles our constructs of success moved and changed. Learning took place through engaging with students and colleagues within the workshops, and as co researchers in reflective sense making sessions afterwards.

Learning from diversity was evidenced in co researcher and participant feedback and this corroborated student feedback in teaching contexts (Page, Gaggiotti and Jarvis, 2008; Page and Gaggiotti, 2012). This diversity was not defined in terms of identity categories, but rather diversity of meaning brought by individuals
from remembered experience, surfaced and shared in the social context of participative inquiry. While sometimes predominant power dynamics suppressed diversity, at other times images provided a means to break predominant narratives and voice a different view.

Graduate members of the research team stated that the experience of co research did support an increase in their confidence, to lead, facilitate and make sense of the visual material generated within co inquiry. As co researchers they learned to critically engage with the constructs of success embedded in their own prior experience and to expand into a wider and more compassionate engagement with their own expectations and with the experiences and expectations of their peers.

I have come to realise that success is not a destination but a journey, one which has no ending until you go to the other side.

Members of the research team stated that the experience of being a member of a participative inquiry team had challenged their understanding of the learning process, and increased their confidence and capacity to be self directed learners.

This project has made me challenge the previous way of learning by being more alert and inquisitive.

The methods utilised in this research project of 'visual inquiry' have enabled me to be more of an evaluative thinker and writer.

The contexts in which each of the three workshops had taken place led to insight on the conditions needed to support student led co inquiry:

Learning can be encouraged in a climate which encourages risk taking, doing things and trying out new ideas. I did not feel this occurred much at university, if anything the complete opposite, as one was made to feel apprehensive about embracing any new approaches/ideas and thus creating reluctance from a student perspective.

This project has helped me to know myself better by allowing that freedom for being creative with my thinking and critiquing, which I do not feel I could have done before and consequently being more confident as a person who may have valuable ideas to contribute. Believing in oneself!

The project demonstrates that student/tutor co inquiry over a period of time develops capacity for self directed learning. In the right context, visual inquiry enables students to experience themselves as meaning makers, critically engaging with given constructs. Our research findings demonstrate the potential of visual inquiry for supporting reflexive student led inquiry, and the potential for student/tutor co facilitation of learning. We have illustrated the complexity and tensions between competing student constructs of success and more importantly, how to create the conditions that support and facilitate visual inquiry as a methodology for exploring this complexity.
References


Learning Through Enquiry Alliance (LTEA) http://www.ltea.ac.uk/ The LTEA is a partnership of Enquiry-Based Learning Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). The CETLS have ended but some of the materials produced are archived and can be accessed on this website.


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